

# Developing a Self-Management Plan to Stabilize Mood Swings

## Objective

To create a realistic self-management plan to manage bipolar symptoms.

## What to Know

Self-management techniques are things you can do on your own to manage bipolar symptoms and avoid episodes of mania and depression. You will have ups and downs, but there are some important things you can do to experience stable moods.

**1. Eat a nutritious diet.** When you are depressed, you might overeat or have little appetite, and when you are manic, you might forget to eat. Either way, you will have inconsistent energy levels. You might be hard on yourself because of inconsistent eating patterns but avoid forcing yourself to follow a standard dietary plan if it does not work for you. If you need support with your diet, see a nutritionist or health coach.

**2. Exercise.** At times you might have very little energy for exercise. Do what you can manage. Try to add some activity into your daily routine and keep it simple. Take a walk, even if it is 10 minutes per day. Exercise can help you notice what is going on with your thoughts and slow them down. Physical activity is sometimes just what you need when you are depressed. Just take things at your own pace.

**3. Sleep.** Disturbed sleep can have profound consequences when you have bipolar disorder, and it is vitally important to develop a healthy sleep routine. Self-management experts suggest the following activities:

- reduce activity before bed
- read or listen to music at low volume
- reduce or eliminate screen time at least two hours before bed
- take a warm bath with herbs or essential oils
- make sure your bed is warm and comfortable
- empty your head of ruminations and worries – write them out in a journal
- avoid caffeine 3-4 hours before bed
- avoid rich or heavy food in the evening
- recite a mental gratitude list

**4. Plan activities for when you feel depressed.** Activity level is the key self-management tool when you are depressed – and one of the most difficult to implement due to reduced motivation, low energy, and fatigue. You might find that staying focused for long enough to initiate activity is difficult, so you might feel stuck.

According to self-management experts, activities when you are depressed should focus on pleasure and achievement – whatever you can manage. Think about what you can realistically do, even if it is just a simple activity like taking a walk or washing the dishes.

Another thing you can do is schedule activities in half-day portions. Divide your time into manageable segments and assign activities to those segments. It might look like this:

9:00-10:00 shower, get dressed, make bed

10:00-11:00 read the newspaper or a good book

11:00-11:30 eat breakfast and tidy the kitchen

11:30-12:00 place online grocery order

This schedule might seem boring and pleasureless, but if you're depressed, completing these activities might be a major achievement. Once you have completed one task, move on to the next. You might not always complete your activity list, and that is OK. You can set an alarm to give yourself a specific amount of time for each task. Doing a creative activity can help, such as drawing, crafting, painting, or collaging.

**5. Work or volunteer.** Work or volunteer activities are good for your self-esteem, confidence, sense of accomplishment, social interaction, and role mastery – even if you can only handle a few hours each week.

**6. Be aware of mood escalation.** Self-management during a manic episode is sometimes more challenging than when you are depressed. You might be full of ideas, energy, and motivation – and you feel very productive! When this happens, it is essential to slow down and reduce activity to avoid a full-blown manic episode. If you do not manage hypomania, you might find yourself sliding into mania and the associated unpleasant symptoms. So, it is critical to attend to early warning signs and act accordingly. Here are some suggestions:

- reduce activity levels
- make time for calming activities
- simplify your routine and stick to it
- internally use the word “STOP” if you have racing thoughts
- eat regularly
- practice listening to others instead of overtalking
- avoid major decisions without seeking a loved one's advice
- if you are excited about a plan or idea, wait 48 hours before deciding on it and write down the pros and cons

**7. Reduce stimulation by focusing on your five senses.**

- **Sight.** Close your eyes to reduce stimulation. Sit and watch a candle burn or focus on a peaceful scene.
- **Smell.** Inhale calming scents.
- **Taste.** Drink a relaxing tea. Eat mindfully and chew your food slowly.
- **Sound.** Relaxing music has a profound effect on mood. Play it at a low volume or listen to an app with relaxing sounds.

- **Touch.** If you don't have a pet, use sensory art material. Make something to squeeze or mold, like clay. You might go swimming and mindfully focus on the water. Get a calming massage or take a warm bath.

**8. Watch for triggers.** Be aware of what triggers depressive and manic episodes. For example, negative thinking is a trigger for depression, and if you find yourself ruminating more than usual, learn ways to stop yourself.

**9. Practice mindfulness activities.** Any form of relaxation can help with bipolar symptoms. Start with 5 minutes a day, build to 10 minutes, and so forth.

**10. Explore your protective factors.** Protective factors are the things that protect you from becoming depressed or manic, or help you recover from an episode. Here are some general protective factors, but think about others that are specific to you that are not on the list:

- take medication as prescribed
- maintain contact with loved ones
- spend time with a pet
- keep regular routines (sleeping, eating)
- stay organized and avoid chaos
- avoid drama and confrontations
- avoid taking on too much
- take regular breaks or vacations
- keep a journal
- exercise regularly
- enjoy a hobby
- other: \_\_\_\_\_
- other: \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Track your moods.** Use a mood chart to track how you are feeling. Share it with loved ones and your mental health providers. Note specific symptoms and any medication side effects.

**12. Expect setbacks.** Sometimes you might feel like your progress is at a stand-still, or you are failing at self-management. Follow your plan and use your skills when you are feeling overwhelmed or hopeless. Use setbacks to learn something new about yourself and to avoid similar problems in the future.

**13. Seek support.** Find trusted people with whom you can share what is going on in your life. Social support is very important in preventing setbacks.

People with bipolar disorder often experience setbacks, relapse, and episode recurrences. But research has shown that if you stick to your self-management plan, continue taking your medications as prescribed, and see your doctor or mental health practitioner regularly, you can minimize full-blown mood episodes.

## What to Do

Complete this worksheet and keep it close at hand so you can refer to it when necessary. Be as detailed and honest as possible when you fill it in. You might want to give a copy to a family member or close friend. You can revisit and revise this plan every few months.

## My Self-Management Plan

What are the signs that tell me I am getting depressed or manic?

Depressed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Manic: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are my triggers?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Here are things I can do to prevent depression:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Here are things I can do to prevent mania:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What are some of my protective factors?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I am using a mood chart to track my moods. Y / N

If not, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

I am taking my medication as prescribed. Y / N

If not, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

What are some things my loved ones might say to me if they notice an escalation of symptoms?

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How can I respond to what they say?

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What are the strategies and techniques I have found most helpful when I'm depressed?

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What are the strategies and techniques I have found most helpful when I'm manic?

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<p><b>Common unhelpful thoughts when I'm depressed</b></p>	<p><b>What can I say to myself in response?</b></p>
<p><b>Common unhelpful thoughts when my mood is elevated</b></p>	<p><b>What can I say to myself in response?</b></p>

What are my support options?

Doctors: \_\_\_\_\_

Counselors/coaches/therapists: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Community resources/agencies: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Friends: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Family: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What can I do if I experience a setback?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Reflections on This Exercise**

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this activity?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_